

## THE NEW REPUBLIC

### The Rescuer

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*A Race Against Death: Peter Bergson, America, and the Holocaust*

by David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff

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Twenty-five years ago, while researching Holocaust history for the Joint Distribution Committee in New York, and as I was preparing to immigrate to Israel, I came across a clipping from *The New York Times* from 1936. Dated Geneva, the article was titled "Suicide Shot Rings at League Session." It told of one Stefan Lux, a journalist of Czech nationality, who burst into the hall of the League of Nations, produced a revolver, shouted "*C'est le dernier coup!*," and shot himself. Four paragraphs of details followed--the incident interrupted a lengthy speech by the Spanish representative, the session dealt with Ethiopia, Belgium's premier was presiding--before I learned that Lux had been "born in Vienna of Jewish parents," and four paragraphs more before his purpose was finally revealed: "to draw attention to the plight of Jews in Germany."

Inured by thousands of reports of massacres--I had long ago reached the point where I could read about Auschwitz over lunch--I was nevertheless stunned by the account of Lux's action. How despondent had this man been to fulfill Hitler's ultimate plans for him! And how deluded was he in his belief that one Jew's death could rouse a world indifferent to the deaths of millions. Buried in the nethermost pages of the *Times*, his Jewishness mentioned only in passing, Stefan Lux came to exemplify for me the impotence that had facilitated the Holocaust, and that Israel had been created to correct. Lux was the very reason why I was moving to the Jewish state, and why I would serve in its army.

My conclusions were perfectly in keeping with the Zionist interpretation of the Holocaust, as enshrined at the Yad Vashem memorial in Jerusalem. Six million Jews died, Yad Vashem explained, because they lacked a state, because they lacked an army. American Jews accepted this interpretation unquestioningly for nearly three decades, until the late 1970s, when parts of the community began to challenge Israel's status as the exclusive repository of Jewish remembrance. Slowly a less political and less Zionist view of the recent catastrophe gained ground, and eventually it found expression in the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, and in many like-minded institutions nationwide.

Visitors to the American exhibitions were exposed to a radically different version of the Holocaust than the one on display at Yad Vashem. No longer was Jewish sovereignty portrayed as the best guarantee against genocide, nor the Holocaust as the dark corollary of Jewish statelessness. Racism and hatred, not the absence of Jewish power, had produced the death camps; and so the remedy was not more militarism, it was tolerance and a strengthening of universal values. In asserting such an interpretation of the catastrophe, American Jewry seemed to be impugning the very idea of Jewish power.

But the tension between the American Jewish understanding of the Holocaust and the Israeli understanding of the Holocaust did not originate in the 1970s. It had begun many years before, in the early months of World War II. The controversy can be traced to the actions of a small group of Jews from Palestine, under the leadership of Peter Bergson. The Bergsonites, as their opponents called them, strove to shake American Jews--and through them the American government--out of their lethargy, and to instruct them in the modern mechanics of power.

Bergson's remarkable story has been told by historians and memoirists (most memorably by his admirer Ben Hecht), but never by Bergson himself. That silence has now ended with the appearance of David S. Wyman and Rafael Medoff's important book. They are veteran chroniclers of America's shameful inaction during the Holocaust; and in their new book they present a summary of the group's operations, followed by oral-history interviews with Bergson and several of his associates, Jews and non-Jews. The transcripts reveal the single-mindedness of Bergson's purpose, his courage and his creativity, and the vision that led him, despite his own sense of failure, to triumph.

On July 7, 1940, a twenty-five-year-old Lithuanian-born Jew, a refugee from Russian pogroms and Jewish Orthodoxy who had moved to Palestine and joined the outlawed Revisionist Zionist movement, landed in New York City. His name was Hillel Kook, but to protect his prominent family back in Palestine--his uncle was the chief rabbi of the Jewish community in Palestine, the extraordinary Abraham Isaac Kook--he adopted the surname of his favorite philosopher and called himself Peter. Together with nine other Palestinian Jews, Peter Bergson set to work establishing a Jewish combat unit to help fight fascism in the Middle East.

Bergson had come at the request of Ze'ev Jabotinsky, the founder of the Revisionists, who had created a Jewish Legion to fight alongside the British in World War I. In contrast to the dominant Zionism of Chaim Weizmann and David Ben-Gurion, which aspired to gradually build a largely agrarian socialist Jewish homeland within Palestine on the basis of the immigration of the ablest young Jews, Revisionism called for immediate mass immigration to establish a capitalist Jewish state in all of Palestine. The Legion, Jabotinsky believed, had helped to achieve that goal by strengthening the Zionist case in the post-World War I debate over Palestine. Now, with the world again at war, he hoped to replicate that achievement with support from the world's emergent superpower: the United States.

Confounding his efforts was the fact that Britain, in a notorious White Paper in 1939, had detached itself from Zionism and practically sealed off Palestine from further Jewish immigration. America, moreover, had yet to enter the war. Yet the obstacles facing Bergson seemed even more insurmountable. A month after he set to work, Jabotinsky died, leaving his young acolytes leaderless. And the Zionist establishment in America, closely linked with the Labor-dominated Jewish Agency, was virulently opposed to Revisionism. Even the non-Zionist organizations, headed by a German-Jewish elite, worked to quash any challenges to their leadership, especially by upstarts such as Bergson. Lastly and most formidably was the American Jewish community itself, which was unlike any that Bergson, who had formerly worked among Jews in Poland and France, had ever encountered.

Regarding themselves as thoroughly American in a way that few European Jews thought of themselves as genuinely European, much less sympathetic to Zionism, American Jews nevertheless lived under a pall of Depression-era anti-Semitism that made them the favorite targets of Father Coughlin and other hate-mongers. "Americans don't like Jews much better than do Nazis," observed *Fortune* in 1939; and according to the polls more than half of the population agreed. Afraid to make themselves troublesome, American Jews were reluctant to criticize their government and especially its president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who had received 90 percent of their votes and whom they naïvely regarded as their protector.

Spurring such a community to fight openly for its interests, to challenge Roosevelt if necessary, would have seemed an impossible mission, but Bergson never shirked from the impossible. "A golden youth ... a kind of prince," was how one fellow Revisionist, Eliahu Amikam, described him. "A bon vivant with British manners ... very bright and ambitious." Upon meeting him for the first time, Ben Hecht was struck by his "small blond mustache, an English accent and a voice inclined to squeak under excitement," but he was soon calling Bergson a "Hebrew hero.... A man devoted to controversy ... stormy with ideas." But Bergson was more than merely heroic. Prescient, possessed of an audacious imagination, he intuited the future symbiosis of the media and power. And if he never quite fathomed the American Jewish community, he certainly understood America.

With no contacts and no real budget to speak of, Bergson established the Committee for a Jewish Army (CJA) on December 5, 1941, and set out in search of members. His luckiest find was Hecht, the prolific writer of books and shows and films, an irreverent spin doctor who, though no Zionist, was fed up with what he scorned as "the hide-your-Jewish-head psychology." During a much-needed meal at the 21 Club in New York, Hecht's favorite eatery, Bergson told his host of his plan to create a Palestinian Jewish army, already trained and only "a bus ride from the front," prepared to fight to the death. "An army with such a spirit can actually change the course of the war in Africa," Bergson exclaimed. "They can win it!"

Hecht was persuaded, and with his copywriting flare Bergson gambled on a tactic never before employed by American Jews. It ran in the January 5 edition of the *Times*: a full-

page advertisement declaring, "Jews Fight for the Right to Fight," and adding: "The Jews of Palestine and the stateless Jews of the world do not only want to pray--THEY WANT TO FIGHT!!!!" Affixed to the statement were the signatures of senators, congressmen, and clergy--another Bergsonian innovation. Contributions flowed in, financing another two hundred advertisements over the next four years, in forty American papers and fifteen American cities; but instead of applauding the accomplishment, American Jewish leaders were outraged. "Full-page ads then was an unheard-of thing," Bergson recalled. "They thought this was obscene. For political [aims]--for Jews! There were Jews on the obituary page of the *Times* ... [but] suddenly an ad? They thought it was a disgrace."

Bergson's advertisements instantly incurred the ire of anti-Zionist organizations such as the American Jewish Committee, which resisted any attempt to distinguish a national Jewish identity, and the wrath of American Zionist leaders headed by Rabbi Stephen S. Wise. A co-founder of the NAACP, the ACLU, and the American Jewish Congress, and a slavish supporter of Roosevelt, Wise abhorred Revisionism--what he called "fascism in Yiddish or Hebrew"--and resented any effort to force the president's hand. Rarely deigning to refer to Bergson by name, Wise in conversations with government officials denounced the "small group of Jews" as alien and subversive. Responding to these charges, both the IRS and the FBI closely monitored the group, but failed to find any irregularities in Bergson's operations--on the contrary, federal agents approached him with expressions of personal support and even offered donations.

Undaunted, Bergson ventured beyond political advertising into another inchoate art: congressional lobbying. Citing the magnitude of the Jewish emergency and therefore the justness of a Jewish army, he recruited senators from states with the fewest Jews--Guy Gillette of Iowa, Ed Johnson of Colorado, Elbert Thomas of Utah. On the basis of a shared hostility to England he persuaded Representative Andrew Somers, a militant Irish nationalist from New York, to sponsor a bill in favor of the CJA. Bergson worked to build what we now call bipartisan coalitions, and to reach out to other liberation movements such as the Indian National Congress and the Free French. He was also quick to grasp the power of celebrity in America, and to harvest it effectively. The stars associated with his campaign included Melvyn Douglas, Frank Sinatra, Jerry Lewis, Jimmy Durante, Dean Martin, and Danny Thomas. Along with performers, there were also the composer and conductor Leonard Bernstein, the Nobel Prize-winning writer Sigrid Undset, the journalists Lowell Thomas, Dorothy Parker, and Pierre van Paassen, and the theologians Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich.

For all the publicity generated by the CJA, most American leaders, who were loath to antagonize their British allies and dissuaded by mainstream Jewish organizations, withheld their support from Bergson. Yet Bergson remained committed to the cause, years later informing Wyman that "we wanted to have a Jewish army because we felt we were a Jewish nation. We were talking about survival as a nation, not as individuals." Diverting him from that task took an event so shattering and so monstrous that neither he nor the American Jewish community could initially grasp its dimensions.

n August 1942, word reached Wise of the Nazi slaughter of hundreds of thousands of Jews. State Department officials, seeking confirmation of the reports, asked Wise not to disclose the information, and he obliged them until November 25. On that day *The New York Times* carried the story on page 10, under a large whiskey ad; there was no follow-up. The American Jewish leadership appeared dumbstruck, stunned by the enormity of the crime but reluctant to press Roosevelt to act, especially now that the United States was fully engaged in the war. They complacently went along with government spokesmen who claimed that winning the war was the quickest way to end the massacres, and that all of America's efforts should be channeled toward that goal. American Zionists were also content to leave the setting of war priorities to the American army and its commander-in-chief. Convening at the Hotel Commodore in New York on November 29, they passed numerous resolutions on Palestine's development, but only one calling attention to "the reported program ... for the extermination of the Jews."

Though unswerving in his Zionist convictions, Bergson believed that saving Jewish lives took precedence over creating a Jewish state, and he revised his agenda accordingly. While he would never abandon his quest for a Jewish army, the bulk of his energies from 1942 on were devoted to the more pressing goal of rescuing European Jews. This could only be accomplished, Bergson concluded, by changing the widespread assumption that that the mass killings were an internal German affair--"We felt that the major reason why nobody did anything was the confusion that the Germans are killing their own Jews and it's none of our business"--and by securing direct American intervention. "There was a powerful government [Germany] using all its resources," he later explained. "By the time we learned about it, it's killed two million people. A method of destruction of such a scope had to be counteracted by another big force"--namely, the United States.

Together with Hecht and a mixed staff of Palestinian and American Jews, Bergson embarked on another ambitious public relations campaign. On the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor, four major newspapers carried a two-page "Proclamation on the Moral Rights of the Stateless and Palestinian Jews," signed by 1,500 prominent Americans, among them Langston Hughes, Humphrey Bogart, Aaron Copland, Eugene O'Neill, and Senator Harry Truman of Missouri, all pledging that "we shall no longer witness with pity alone ... the calculated extermination of the ancient Jewish people by the barbarous Nazis." More ads followed, together with dozens of pro-Bergson editorials authorized by William Randolph Hearst, who became an ardent benefactor.

Propelled by this publicity, Bergson steadily gained access to higher sources of power: to former President Herbert Hoover, to Secretary of Defense Cordell Hull, and finally to Eleanor Roosevelt, all of whom assured him of their sympathy. But their sympathy could not save the Jews. In their Moscow Declaration of November 1, 1943, the Allied Powers listed numerous victims of Nazi atrocities--Poles, Serbs, Russians, Cretans--but they excluded the Jews. Similarly, the Anglo-American conference on refugees, held in Bermuda in April, produced no plan for rescue nor even additional visas for refugees. Any hope of progress was again expunged by Britain's refusal to re-open Palestine to

Jewish immigration, and by the State Department's fear of an anti-American backlash in the Arab world. Underlying such strategic considerations, however, was the old school anti-Semitism epitomized by Undersecretary of State Breckinridge Long, in charge of refugee affairs, who deliberately stalled visa applications and limited those issued to less than ten percent of the American quota.

"To 5,000,000 Jews caught in the Nazi deathtrap, Bermuda was a `cruel mockery,'" declared an ad designed by Bergson and signed by thirty-three senators. It was Bergson's view that the Bermuda conference, by signaling Germany that there would be no political or diplomatic or military cost for the murder of Jews, had removed the last moral impediment to assailing Roosevelt. "They tried to avoid the word `Jew' at Bermuda," Wyman quotes Samuel Merlin, a close Bergson associate, as saying. "Our first concern was to destroy the anonymity of the victim." Another advertisement had the ghost of Hecht's Uncle Abraham, killed by the Germans, waiting forlornly on a White House windowsill for Roosevelt to take some action, while another regaled the *Times'* readers with "Oh hang and burn but--quiet, Jews! ... The world is busy with other news."

The American Jewish establishment, hardly enamored of Bergson before, was now livid. "*Mi samcha*," Wise accosted Bergson at a turbulent meeting at the end of 1943, quoting the Israelite in Exodus who berated Moses when he attempted to intervene in his dispute with another Israelite: "Who empowered you?" Bergson's response was unlikely to conciliate the rabbi: "We represent the conscience of the Hebrew nation. We represent ourselves. You are an American clergyman and a member of the Democratic Party.... On the day on which one square yard of Palestine will be free, I shall be there as a citizen, and abide by the decision of whoever will be the government of the Hebrew people.... Whereas you will then continue to be an American clergyman, member of the Democratic Party."

Wise went on to warn of an upsurge of anti-Semitism in America, and the cancellation of tax-exempt status for Jewish charities, and the need for "ten divisions" of GIs to quell the Arab revolt in Palestine, should Bergson persist with his demands. Wise, Bergson recalled, "typical of what I call the ghetto Jewish leadership, surrendered [to Roosevelt] without a word.... They [the Jewish leaders] thought that we are ... little guys who are working for their own ego and position as Jewish charity bureaucrats. They call us irresponsible.... `Responsible' means do nothing."

But Jewish leaders did not do nothing. Together with Nahum Goldmann, his co-founder in the World Jewish Congress, Wise urged administration officials to deport or to draft Bergson, and pressured politicians to avoid him. Samuel Rosenman, a prominent member of the American Jewish Committee and a close adviser to Roosevelt, told the president not to meet with a delegation of four hundred Orthodox rabbis that Bergson had brought to Washington to protest American policy. "Rosenman to me is the most guilty of the bunch," Bergson recounted bitterly. When, in March 1943, Bergson rented out Madison Square Garden for the production of Ben Hecht's play *We Will Never Die*--produced by Billy Rose, directed by Moss Hart, with a score by Kurt Weill, and starring Paul Muni,

Edward G. Robinson, and Stella Adler--Wise and his colleagues lobbied intensely to keep the curtain from rising.

They failed. The show sold out and played in a half-dozen cities, reaping tremendous profits. With these revenues, Bergson organized the Emergency Conference to Save the Jewish People of Europe, held on July 20, 1943 in New York, where 1,500 participants produced nine proposals for rescue, including the threat to try all facilitators of the Final Solution for war crimes. The conference set up an Emergency Committee whose goal was to promote the creation of a permanent American commission on refugees. A pioneer in political advertising and lobbying, Bergson was also breaking ground in the fields of political action that we now call human rights and humanitarian intervention.

uch a commission already existed to preserve endangered art works in Europe, but no similar body was established to save the Jews. Since the initiative had been Bergson's, Jewish leaders managed to block it in the House. Yet the Senate voted unanimously in favor of the commission, and when the Treasury Department reported on Long's efforts to impede immigration, in a report called "Acquiescence of This Government in the Murder of the Jews," Roosevelt realized that he could no longer ignore the issue. The result was the establishment on January 22, 1944 of the War Refugee Board, which was charged "to take all measures within its power to rescue the victims of enemy oppression."

A classic case of too little too late, the board was meagerly empowered and feebly budgeted. It succeeded in saving only an estimated 200,000 Jews. Bergson meanwhile continued to press for additional efforts, such as the designation of free ports and shelters for refugees. In contrast to the board's emphasis on helping refugees, he sought to create more refugees. "Jews within Europe should not be considered potential refugees but potential corpses," he said. His boldest scheme, launched in May 1944, was the Hebrew Committee of National Liberation. Conceived as a government-in-exile, complete with a Washington embassy, the committee claimed to represent all stateless and Palestinian Jews and demanded recognition as a co-belligerent in the war.

The platform of the Hebrew Committee unleashed a torrent of opposition from Jewish leaders appalled by its arrogation of the Jewish Agency's authority and by its alleged attempt to divide the Jewish nation. Goldmann told the State Department that Wise now "regarded Bergson as equally as great an enemy to the Jews as Hitler," and exhorted Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau, Jr. that "everything must be done to liquidate the Bergsonites." One aide to the secretary noted that "every organization ... is more interested in their fight with some other organization than they are with the objective of saving Jews.... I think the feeling is so strong in this issue that I wouldn't be surprised to see Bergson killed."

By the war's end, Bergson recalled, he was "worn out ... beat. There was a sense of losing. A sense of failure." But that pessimism did not prevent him from mounting

another Zionist extravaganza, *A Flag Is Born*--the young Marlon Brando had a leading role. The proceeds went to purchase *The Ben Hecht*, a refugee smuggling boat, and to publish a magazine called *The Answer*, whose logo, "1776 is Palestine," equated the struggle of Zionism for a Jewish state in Palestine with America's fight for independence. With the termination of the British Mandate over Palestine on May 14, 1948, Bergson ceased all activities in the United States ("we are the only group in Jewish public life that ever liquidated themselves voluntarily"), rented a DC-3, and flew off to take part in the war for Israel's creation. Behind him he left an agonized belief in what he and his group had nearly accomplished:

The whole effort was to convince ... the people, the five hundred or whatever it is, who make up the policy-making thing of the [U.S.] government ... that this is an important war [to save Jews ] that they have to engage in. ... We failed. This is the truth. We came close, we came close. We came close.

ut did Bergson really fail? The existence of the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum and its like could easily be adduced as evidence that he did. Bergson came to teach the American Jews about power and its applications to the Holocaust--a supremely Zionist lesson. Sixty years later, his teachings appear to have been lost. The gap between American Jewish and Israeli interpretations of the Holocaust widens, as indicated by the recent exhibition at the Jewish Museum in New York called "Mirroring Evil: Nazi Imagery," with its implicit criticism of all power structures, American and Israeli. American Jewish and Israeli teenagers who once joined hands on March of the Living visits to the death camps now embark on separate pilgrimages--the Americans to educate themselves about hatred, the Israelis to prepare for the army.

And yet such appearances are fundamentally deceiving. Just up the road from the Holocaust Memorial, in the United States Capitol, the American Jewish community maintains one of the nation's most effective and powerful lobbies. The same mainstream organizations that once excoriated Bergson and his tactics today spend millions of dollars annually on pamphlets and advertisements defending Israel. No president, Republican or Democrat, can afford to ignore the concerted Jewish vote. American Jews pay homage to the spirit of America's civil society, and inveigh against prejudice, and extol brotherhood, but they have also learned the Bergsonian lesson: to wield power unashamedly, in accordance with their rights and their needs.

This, as Wyman and Medoff's book reminds us, is Bergson's ultimate victory. Through his revolutionary and often quirky example, he showed American Jews that they need not sit silently while six million of their co-religionists were destroyed. Nor must they beat their breasts--or worse, like Stefan Lux, turn to suicide--to get the world's attention. Bergson demonstrated that Jews everywhere had nothing to fear from exerting power, but an incalculable amount to lose.

As with most victories, Bergson's came at a price, not only national but also personal. Unable to blend into Israeli society, at odds not only with the reigning socialists but also with the new Revisionist leaders who objected to his insistence that Israel distinguish

itself from world Jewry by declaring itself a "Hebrew" state, he dabbled in international trade and died near Tel Aviv, largely forgotten but once again Hillel Kook, in August, 2001. All his life he remained bitter about the American Jewish leadership during World War II and perplexed by its inability to act. "If I were a Jewish leader, dead, I'd probably be turning in my grave," he finally confessed to his interviewers. "And if I was alive, I would probably have a very guilty conscience."

More than half a century later, with the generation of the Holocaust now passing from our midst, the relevance of Bergson's legacy is undiminished, and not only for American and Israeli Jews. That legacy reminds us that silence is the handmaiden of genocide, and fear its unwitting assistant. By standing up for the imperiled, by insisting on morality in foreign policy, and by asserting unassailable human rights, evil can still be combated. In a world in which mass murders are still with us, the teachings of Peter Bergson deserve to be honored. The age of genocide is not over, and the example of Bergson's activism, of his insistence upon the priority of conscience in foreign policy, of his conviction that the sense of self-reliance and the sense of mutual responsibility are both necessary for the fight against undeniable evil--all this makes him a figure who deserves to endure in memory.

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